BUILDING CHANGES

END HOMELESSNESS TOGETHER

Creating and Leading Washington State's First Public-Private Partnership to Reduce Family Homelessness: The Washington Families Fund (2004–2009)

Prepared by Building Changes 2012

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Introduction

During the last decade, families with children have constituted the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population nationwide.[i] Unlike homeless individuals, they are usually out of the public eye, living in cars or doubling-up with other families in often-overcrowded conditions. The reasons families become homeless vary: A job loss, an unforeseen financial or health crisis, or domestic violence could propel them from an already financially precarious situation into housing loss.[ii] The continued cutback of federal and state social welfare programs in the last two decades has only made securing stable housing more challenging for those living in poverty.

In Washington State, there were approximately 3,000 families that experienced homelessness in 2011, although that figure is most likely an undercount.[iii] While the experience of homelessness is undeniably stressful for adults, especially when compounded with the trauma of violence and other factors that forced them into homelessness, the consequences for children can have lasting impact. As a result of losing their home life and routine, children suffer from poor physical and mental health, experience hunger, and often transfer or drop out of school altogether.[iv]

To address this societal challenge, a group of private funders, government officials, nonprofit advocates, and lawmakers in 2004 formed the Washington Families Fund (WFF), a public-private partnership that funds services in housing for families experiencing homelessness. Building Changes, a nonprofit organization working to end homelessness in Washington State, leads the program. Since its inception, WFF has secured more than $28 million from 25 public and private funding sources, and re-granted funds to 39 providers throughout the state. WFF grantee providers have served 1,750 families, including more than 3,000 children, across the state. The results are promising: More than 70 percent of the children stayed stable in their schools rather than transfer as a result of homelessness, and approximately 60 percent of families have exited into stable housing. As WFF continues to serve families, the program is undergoing extensive evaluation to identify the often complex challenges that homeless families face and to continue evolving best practices in helping them attain stability.

This case study provides a concise history of the vision that led to WFF, the sometimes challenging path it took to get there, and the program's most unique attributes.

WFF's original visionaries had a different goal than what was ultimately created: They had sought to secure a *sustainable* stream of public dollars that was already serving low-income families (called "mainstream" funding in this case study) to fund housing and services for all families that experienced homelessness in Washington State. While that goal remains elusive to this day, the establishment of WFF was its own success. It was the first public-private partnership in the state that effectively blended public and private dollars to support innovation in serving families. This document spans the history of WFF up until 2009, when the partnership's mission expanded to include a new range of work that continues to unfold to this day.

A separate companion document to this case study, "Leading a Public-Private Partnership: Recommendations Based on the Washington Families Fund (2004–2009)," offers what Building Changes believes are its best practices for leading a complex program with multiple stakeholders. It reflects the organization's desire to share salient insights and lessons from its experiences, and is not intended to be a comprehensive, peer-reviewed compendium of best practices for developing and leading a public-private partnership.

Creation of the Washington Families Fund

Drawing on Promising Results and Public Will

While WFF is the first *statewide* program in Washington State that supports providers serving homeless families, it was the direct descendant of an initiative whose promising results built public will to tackle family homelessness. In 2000, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched the Sound Families Initiative, an ambitious, $40-million effort that sought to triple in five years the number of housing units for homeless families in the state's most populous counties, King, Pierce, and Snohomish.[v] This one-time investment brought the support and resources of seven county and city housing authorities as well as nonprofit housing and service providers, creating a community-wide partnership that combined housing with services for families experiencing homelessness.[vi] Under the initiative, transitional housing programs offered housing for up to two years, along with a package of services including mental health counseling and money management training to support self-sufficiency at exit from the program.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation wanted to do more than simply fund new units—it also wanted to advance a deeper understanding of how best to address the relatively new phenomenon of family homelessness. The foundation selected the University of Washington's School of Social Work to conduct longitudinal research of the families being served through the initiative. Over the years, the data produced significant findings: Nearly 75 percent of families transitioned to stable housing after completing their program, demonstrating that housing with services could help most families achieve stability.[vii] However, a minority was not succeeding with the same slate of services in transitional housing. About 25 percent were leaving their program early or facing eviction. These families were homeless not only because of economic hardship or a one-time crisis, but because they had deeper, underlying challenges including substance abuse and trauma from violence.

The Sound Families Initiative ultimately funded 1,445 units, but it was already exciting community leaders midway through its five-year run. In 2003, faced with the reality that this one-time investment would soon come to its end, a group of visionary individuals began to explore how they could develop a permanent, publicly funded program to serve all families experiencing homelessness in Washington State.

Securing State Support for a New Program

The visionaries hailed from a wide range of sectors and organizations, including private funders, officials from state, county, and city government agencies, and nonprofit advocates.[1] Together, they aimed for the same housing-with-services combination that had made Sound Families a success—but they faced a challenge with the services' side of the equation. Whereas affordable housing units remained affordable for decades after construction, public funding for services was all too often subject to changes in the economy as well as in fiscal and political priorities. Instead of seeking legislative funding, which would have required lobbying efforts during each legislative session, the visionaries sought an administrative allocation of funds from the federal welfare program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which the governor's office managed.[2]

TANF seemed to be the perfect fit for funding a service-enriched housing program for families experiencing homelessness. Created in 1996, the program provided income support for the country's poorest families; by default, nearly all families experiencing homelessness would be eligible for TANF. It also brought in dollars from the "mainstream system" that served the broader public into the financially stretched homelessness system. And, as luck would have it, the federal government had recently dispensed a TANF "bonus" fund—additional money that other states were using on innovative projects to support low-income families.

The TANF strategy did not succeed. By the time the visionaries had honed in on the bonus fund, the governor's office had already fully allocated its dollars to other commitments. Furthermore, they found that directing TANF funds to homeless families did not have political traction. A one-time bonus fund notwithstanding, TANF's central goal was to decrease caseloads and limit eligibility.

Their sustainable funding option gone, the visionaries turned to the legislature as their next-best alternative. It was a year of severe state deficits, but they had reason to hope. The Washington State legislature had a record of actively supporting housing and homelessness programs. Instead of merely distributing federal dollars among local recipients, in recent decades, the legislature had created state programs such as the Transitional Housing Operating and Rent (THOR) program, which offered rental assistance to homeless and low-income populations, and the Washington State Housing Trust Fund, which created and maintained housing for low-income individuals and those with special needs.

The visionaries headed to Olympia with two key assets: allies and data. Their idea of a housing-with-services program had gained a chorus of supporters. Housing and service providers throughout the state, including public housing authorities, "wanted to have the same opportunity to combine public

1 The visionaries came together as concerned community leaders rather than as representatives of their respective organizations. They included individuals who were at the time working at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Medina Foundation, the Meyer Memorial Trust, the Seattle Foundation, the state Department of Commerce and Department of Social and Human Services, the governments of King County and City of Seattle, the King County Housing Authority, and nonprofit organizations such as Common Ground, the Washington State Coalition for the Homeless, and the Washington State Housing Finance Commission.

2 Washington State's arrangement in which the governor's office—and not the state legislature—controls TANF funding is highly unusual. It is the result of local, political factors in Washington State when the federal government created the program in 1996. In 2012, legislators started work to transfer administration of TANF from the governor's office to the Washington State legislature.

and private dollars"[viii] that King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties had under the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Sound Families Initiative. Additionally, three of the largest statewide housing and homelessness advocacy organizations[3] agreed to prioritize the program in their 2004 legislative agendas and advocate for its enactment. The new program had a statewide coalition of advocates.

The data played a central role in their message. The Sound Families evaluation findings showed that a statewide program was a worthy public investment—that housing paired with services was an effective way to reduce family homelessness. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation was an active player in educating legislators about Sound Families. Others added incentives to support the program's enactment in a difficult budget year. Quite significantly, private funders, including corporate philanthropists, offered to leverage each public dollar with a private match, thus doubling the impact of taxpayer funds. They also asked for one-time funding[4] rather than an ongoing funding stream, leaving legislators free to decide whether to continue funding the program in the future.[5]

The proposed program soon gained legislative champions who were in key positions of influence. According to one of them, Rep. Ruth Kagi, Chair of the House Children and Family Services Committee: "The evaluations from Sound Families so clearly showed the impact on children, families, employment—just a whole range of issues that the state is very concerned about."[ix] Furthermore, the prospect of private matching dollars had great appeal: It would be the first time in Washington State that the private sector would officially partner with the state to shoulder costs typically borne by government.

Funding for a new program usually took years to gain legislative traction, but this program—as well as the sheer number of advocates testifying on behalf of it—quickly acquired bipartisan support. In 2004, the state legislature made an initial contribution of $2 million from the state's operating budget, which it directed to the state Department of Commerce.[6] The new program was called the Homeless Families Services Fund, but was later changed to the Washington Families Fund.

Bringing Private Funders to a Public-Private Partnership

Securing $2 million from the state was half the battle. Finding the matching private dollars was the next challenge. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation put forward $2 million—with the second million as a challenge grant to bring as many private funders as possible to the new partnership. AIDS Housing of Washington (AHW) applied to administer the fund: Its first task would be to raise the $1 million required match. Now known as Building Changes, AHW was a well-known local and national leader in housing development, technical assistance, program administration, and evaluation. At the time, the 15-year-old organization focused on people experiencing homelessness, especially those living with HIV/AIDS.

Betsy Lieberman, then AHW's executive director, embarked on her statewide mission accompanied by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's then-Acting Director of Pacific

3 The three statewide housing associations were the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance (WLIHA), the Washington State Coalition for the Homeless (WSCH), and the Association of Washington Housing Authorities (AWHA).

4 Because the state agreed to provide one-time funding in 2004, Building Changes has had to go back to the legislature each year to request additional funding from the state for WFF.

5 In subsequent years, the broad philanthropic support for WFF was critical in securing state funding renewals.

6 At the time, the Washington State Department of Commerce was called the Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development (CTED).

Northwest Giving, Katie Hong, and the Medina Foundation's then-Executive Director, Tricia McKay. The trio made a formidable team. Ms. Lieberman brought passion and expertise in serving people experiencing homelessness. As a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation representative, Ms. Hong opened the door to meetings with numerous would-be funders. And, speaking on behalf of a foundation that did not possess the size and heft of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Ms. McKay made the case for why small philanthropies should support WFF. She pointed out that few foundations on their own could afford to fund the technical assistance for grantees and program evaluation, which would both be part of WFF. She also emphasized that by pooling their resources, individual funders could leverage their dollars and have an impact on reducing homelessness that they could not otherwise have on their own.[x]

In early 2005, Building Changes had secured the $1 million, with 13 private funders partnering with the state. The 14 partners' $5 million commitment to establish WFF was an unprecedented, statewide demonstration of public and private will to address family homelessness. Over the years, the funds and number of private partners continued to grow. By 2011, WFF had amassed $28 million—$13.6 million from the state and $14.4 million from 24 private funders.

WFF's ongoing success in securing and retaining funders was due not only to the compelling nature of its work but to its advocates' ability to build strong, interpersonal connections with those whom they solicited. "People work with the people they want to work with," said Ms. McKay. "If we had just written the best proposal with eloquent language, we would have had limited success. Instead, we reached out, sat down, and talked with people. WFF became something that people wanted to be a part of because we were able to tap into that human element of collaboration."

The Challenge of Sustainability

The inability to secure a sustainable funding source from a mainstream resource such as TANF left WFF vulnerable to "funding cliffs," should the state or private funders cut their support. In order to maintain continuity in public funding, advocates must mount a lobbying effort during each legislative session, sometimes in the face of fiscal deficits, and more recently, against the backdrop of a deep recession. At the same time, the interests of private funders can move to other causes. For now, WFF's overall success has resulted in 23 of the 24 private funders renewing their support year after year.

Nevertheless, Building Changes and WFF partners are keenly aware of the funding cliff they face when the money for their five- and ten-year grants runs out. With the first round of ten-year grants expiring in 2015, Building Changes is working hard with community partners to chart the course for the program and its grantees.

Selecting an Intermediary Organization to Lead the Partnership

The selection of Building Changes to administer WFF was not a quick decision. This blending of public and private dollars was the first of its kind in the state, and the partners faced a quandary: Who would administer the fund? Before they could proceed with WFF's mission, they would all have to agree on who would hold the purse strings and how the funding structure should be established.

With the state Department of Commerce holding the $2 million from the legislature, Commerce representatives argued that the pooled public and private dollars should remain under government control. They were concerned that relinquishing funds to a non-governmental entity would result in inadequate oversight and accountability of taxpayer money.

Private funders balked. They believed that the presence of their dollars would generate creativity in how WFF was designed and how programmatic improvements were made. They feared, however, that if Commerce administered the fund, it would be too rigid in its funding approach and not permit any necessary risk-taking.

The funders suggested selecting an intermediary organization to manage the funds, and Commerce agreed. Together, they sought "an organization that had a good track record in program administration, program evaluation, and ongoing technical assistance—as well as fundraising."[xi] To help make the decision, Commerce convened and staffed a Steering Committee, comprised of foundations, nonprofit housing and service providers, housing authorities, local governments from across the state, and both Commerce and the state Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) representatives.

Through a competitive process, the group selected Building Changes to serve as WFF administrator. In their minds, a nonprofit was a perfect compromise: It was more nimble and less bureaucratic than a governmental entity. Yet, it would still offer strong fiscal oversight through its board of directors. The Steering Committee went on to serve in an advisory capacity to Building Changes' board.

Once tapped, the agency set out to reconcile the conflicting views on where pooled funds should reside and how they should be managed. The agency negotiated with the state attorney general's office, and after much back-and-forth, reached a contractual agreement that satisfied both public and private stakeholders. (For details on this agreement as well as the oversight structure of WFF, please refer to this case study's companion document.)

Building Changes next turned to WFF's start-up activities. The agency tapped the expertise of the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH), a national nonprofit that helps communities establish supportive housing linked with services for homeless people, to advise on creating its grantmaking and funds disbursement structure. From there, Building Changes relied on its own expertise in program administration, technical assistance, and evaluation to foster and support relationships with grantee organizations.

The Washington Families Fund "is a story about people coming together from across the state—from within the legislature, from city and county jurisdictions and all of our state's public housing authorities, from private foundations and homeless coalitions and affordable housing advocates and nonprofits that serve families experiencing homelessness—who all realized that if we can pool our resources and expertise, we can accomplish great things."[xii]

–Kim Herman,
Washington State Housing Finance Commission

Leading the Washington Families Fund

In many ways, the real work began after the establishment of WFF's organizational structure. As the agency leading WFF, Building Changes plays a variety of roles. Because Building Changes is not a government agency, a philanthropic funder, or a direct service provider, it can convene these parties and pursue a different way of doing business that does not simply adhere to the status quo. It acts as a leader in bringing best practices and fresh ideas to the program, a relationship manager with myriad stakeholders in the partnership, and an administrator that ensures the program is effectively working to reduce family homelessness in Washington State. Furthermore, Building Changes is unique in its ability to package its grantmaking, technical assistance, and evaluation in-house and deploy them together in the service of WFF.

Innovation: Incorporating Best Practices to Effectively Serve Families

Shortly after the first round of grants was disbursed in 2005, Building Changes began to explore how WFF could address a major finding from its predecessor, the Bill &

Melinda Gates Foundation's Sound Families Initiative. The University of Washington School of Social Work's evaluation data had shown that, while a majority of families were moving into stable housing after a year, about 25 percent of families were failing out of transitional housing due to chemical dependency or mental health issues.[xiii] Their needs, according to the evaluation, "exceeded the capacity of what programs could provide...."[xiv]

Building Changes and the Steering Committee recognized that this cohort of families would need more intensive services within a permanent supportive housing setting, which did not impose time limits on their length of stay. To develop this service model, they decided to explore the treatment philosophies and types of services that would best serve this population.

Building Changes' staff solicited 30 behavioral health organizations and housing and service providers statewide for input. Twelve agencies participated in an intensive, six-month planning process. They identified the key components of an effective service model and brainstormed about which partner organizations they could bring onboard to ensure that their communities could provide the full slate of services they envisioned. In turn, Building Changes staff provided capacity-building trainings on practices such as harm reduction. The agency also paid the agencies for their time, recognizing that their insights were critical to creating an effective service model for a hard-to-serve population.

In the end, Building Changes created a two-tiered system, with one service model for "Moderate-Needs Families," who made up the majority of WFF families, and another for "High-Needs Families." The Moderate-Needs service model funded services in transitional housing, which allowed families to stay up to two years. During that time, they received case management and life skills training, such as budget management and parenting. Grantee providers were required to secure a $2 match for each WFF dollar, and received a ten-year WFF award that Building Changes incrementally disbursed through the grant period.

The High-Needs service model offered five-year grants for services within a permanent supportive housing setting. Families in these programs faced multiple, co-occurring challenges: They had a history of homelessness, experience of abuse and trauma, substance abuse challenges, and ongoing medical or mental health problems. Many had come under the attention of Child Protective Services—in fact, about one-third of the parents had a child living apart from them.[xv] To receive the grant, which was disbursed over the course of the five-year period, grantee providers were responsible for obtaining a $1 match for each WFF dollar.

While many of WFF's 39 grantee providers focus their resources on only one of the two service models, a handful serve both Moderate- and High-Needs families. Twenty-six providers offer services on a Moderate-Needs level, and 14 offer them on a High-Needs level.

With the WFF service models in place, Building Changes continued to study the families they served and incorporate innovative practices to better support them. In response to data showing that many Moderate-Needs families' incomes were not rising and that some families, in fact, were losing public benefits for which they were still eligible, Building Changes decided that the service model should include an emphasis on strengthening parents' employment skills while ensuring that they retained their benefits. A full-time, minimum-wage job does not cover market-rate rent anywhere in Washington State, but many Moderate-Needs parents were unable to secure higher wages, leaving them in the same financially vulnerable position that had resulted in their homelessness in the first place.

Building Changes requested that Moderate-Needs providers prioritize employment opportunities in their services for families. Each provider could assess its own community resources and identify areas for linking its families to employment training and support. Simultaneously, Building Changes began engaging several local workforce development agencies. While the agencies served the overall population of job seekers, they were unaware of the specific challenges that people experiencing homelessness faced while looking for work. After a few years of relationship-building and joint planning, in 2007, the Moderate-Needs service model officially included an emphasis on employment, with workforce agencies and grantee organizations coordinating efforts to increase families' education and employment skills. Alongside the new employment emphasis was an equally strong focus on helping families maintain public benefits, including housing subsidies, to ensure a smooth transition as they regained employment.

Likewise, with the High-Needs cohort, Building Changes noted the striking percentage of families that had involvement with the Children's Administration, the state child welfare agency. They began to see a correlation: Children in families experiencing homelessness were much more likely to enter foster care or receive other child welfare services. Conversely, many families that had frequent contact with the child welfare system had also experienced homelessness. As a result, in 2009, Building Changes began convening experts from the homelessness and child welfare systems, which had previously never coordinated efforts, to discuss how to prevent unnecessary entry into foster care and how to re-unite families more quickly.

Relationship Management

While Building Changes' focus on innovation yields major, high-level adjustments in WFF, the agency's relationship management constitutes the day-to-day work that keeps the machinery well-oiled and running. As the intermediary organization, Building Changes is at the center of a web of partnerships that includes the public, private, and nonprofit sectors and spans multiple levels, from funders to grantees. Effectively managing these relationships ensures that Building Changes is cognizant of individual entities' priorities and concerns while maintaining a high-level awareness of how each one fits into the overall picture.

With all these relationships, Building Changes' approach is one of mutual partnership. As both a grant-seeker and grantmaker, Building Changes is fully aware of the inherent power imbalances between funder and grantee. Building Changes views grantee providers as partners in learning, and this philosophy is infused in all their interactions—whether through the grant application process or during technical assistance trainings and program evaluation. A relationship built on trust, open communication, and a spirit of mutual education allows all partners to continue fine-tuning WFF to better serve families.

Why Five- and Ten-Year Grants?

It is unusual for grantmakers to award multi-year grants, especially ones as long as five and ten years. However, Building Changes believes that steady, long-term funding supports real results. The funding continuity allows grantees to better focus on their clients and test promising practices. Together, grantee providers and Building Changes can examine lessons learned and extract best practices to improve services for families.

"Building Changes pushed partners' envelope by walking with them. They pushed the state to be collaborative, funders to be greater risk-takers, and providers to think hard about how to do the best job. They did this by staying in touch with various funders and with government staff and grantees, so they never felt they were out on their own."

–Donald Chamberlain,
Sound Thinking
(former Building Changes' staff member)

Grantmaking

Building Changes became a grantmaking entity for the first time when the agency was selected to lead WFF. From the onset, WFF's partners sought to include grantees from all parts of the state, especially traditionally underrepresented, small, rural communities. As a state-funded program, WFF ideally would feature a diverse representation of providers from all corners of the state, rather than have a cluster of providers from its more densely populated areas. The geographic restrictions that several private funders and community foundations had added to the complexity of grantmaking.

To promote geographic diversity, Building Changes staff held community meetings with county housing authorities as well as nonprofit housing and service providers throughout the state, with a specific focus on rural providers. They recognized that a significant disparity in resources and capacity existed between large and small providers. For example, larger providers usually had their own dedicated grants writer, while smaller providers often relied on case managers and volunteers to complete their applications. As a result, Building Changes offered direct engagement and ongoing communication to the latter throughout the application process.

After the awards were announced, the grantmaking team maintained contact with applicants who did not receive a grant. They provided extensive feedback, including an organizational budget analysis, an assessment of general strengths and weaknesses, and a comparison with other applicants. They encouraged providers to apply again, and worked with them between funding rounds to improve their organizational capacity and to seek out community partners, such as local housing authorities, to submit joint applications.

Over the course of grantees' five- and ten-year grants, providers and the Building Changes grantmaking team built rapport and trust. One of the major benefits of the multi-year funding was the open, honest relationships that flourished over time.

Technical Assistance

Building Changes provides technical assistance as well as a range of professional development trainings for grantee providers and their staff. The technical assistance team offers in-person trainings on evidence-based practices and emerging practices, phone and e-mail consultation, and peer-learning opportunities. Grantees also receive financial assistance to attend conferences or trainings, including those not offered by Building Changes' staff.

During the last seven years, the program team amassed a set of insights for effectively consulting and training grantees. For these insights, please refer to this case study's companion document.

Evaluation

Building Changes uses evaluation data to track WFF's successes, discover areas that need programmatic improvement, and ultimately, to learn whether the service models are effectively serving families. Because the requirements of Moderate- and High-Needs families are so different, the agency takes a distinct evaluation approach with each service model.

For the Moderate-Needs service model, evaluation goals are mainly to determine general family outcomes—employment, children's school stability, and whether families secure permanent housing after exiting the program. This service model has shown promising results—increased incomes for parents, more school stability for children, and a majority of families transitioning into stable housing after an average of 11 months.

For the High-Needs service model, Building Changes selected Westat, a research and statistical survey organization based in Washington, D.C., for two projects. The first was to design an evaluation to assess the program's impact on families. Westat tracks both the clients for progress and the grantee providers to ensure they are adhering to the agreed-upon treatment philosophy. The evaluation process follows a rigorous protocol: Case managers first screen families to determine eligibility. They next conduct a baseline assessment of participating families, and follow up with additional data every six months.

The second project takes a wider view of whether the permanent support housing setting in which the High-Needs families receive their services is the best approach for helping them achieve stability. Thanks to a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Westat is conducting a longitudinal study comparing the WFF High-Needs cohort with a separate set of families with similar housing and service needs. Data from the latter group comes from DSHS. The results of this research will have far-reaching implications beyond WFF, providing important insight on how to best serve families that have experienced chronic homelessness as a result of abuse, trauma, substance abuse, and other health challenges.

Reflecting on WFF's Accomplishments

In a span of two brief years, a remarkable thing happened: A group of private funders, government officials, and nonprofit advocates envisioned creating a statewide, sustainable program to serve the fastest-growing population among people experiencing homelessness. While these visionaries fell short of the goal for sustainability, they quickly pivoted to convince the state legislature to enact and fund a new program. Then they strove to bring on board a diverse group of foundations and corporate philanthropists to serve as equal partners to government and match the taxpayer dollars. These leaders had created the state's first public-private partnership—but what would be its structure, its rules of engagement? They ultimately landed on a satisfactory solution, selecting an intermediary organization to lead the partnership and manage its day-to-day affairs.

While Building Changes took on its role with already-existing expertise on technical assistance and evaluation, the agency embarked on its own extensive learning experience since WFF's inception in 2004. Working with funders and grantee providers helped its staff to develop a fuller picture of the needs of families experiencing homelessness and the solutions that could help them achieve self-sufficiency. WFF has successfully fostered partnerships among government officials, nonprofit and for-profit housing developers, service providers, and local housing authorities—many of whom had never collaborated together.

While the program is not what its original visionaries had aimed to achieve, WFF's leaders are evolving it to expand its mission and scope. In 2009, as part of that effort, a group of state, county, and local elected officials, leaders from philanthropy and the nonprofit sector, and corporate allies signed a Memorandum of Understanding pledging to re-double efforts to reduce family homelessness and align funding streams so that resources can be used more effectively.

As these leaders strive for sustainability, WFF will continue to yield new insights that will carry them forward, hopefully, into a future where all families in Washington State receive the support they need when a housing crisis strikes.

WFF History Timeline

2003:

- Visionaries begin brainstorming a statewide program offering housing with services for families experiencing homelessness.
- Homelessness advocates join in support and lobby for its enactment.

2004:

- The Washington State legislature creates WFF with a $2 million appropriation.
- Thirteen private funders join WFF and contribute $3 million, for a total of $5 million.

2005:

- WFF disburses its first round of grants to ten programs statewide, totaling 109 housing units, under its Moderate-Needs service model.

2007:

- Building Changes, with the input of 12 organizations, develops the High-Needs service model.
- Building Changes expands the Moderate-Needs service model to emphasize employment opportunities.

2008:

- Research organization Westat begins to evaluate families in High-Needs service model.

2009:

- A group of state, county, city, housing authority, philanthropic, and nonprofit leaders sign a Memorandum of Understanding pledging to ensure that public resources are effectively used to serve homeless and at-risk families.
- Building Changes identifies the homelessness–child welfare connection among High-Needs families and initiates dialogue between the two systems for joint collaboration.
- Building Changes solicits the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's support for a longitudinal study to test effectiveness of permanent supportive housing for serving High-Needs families.

Endnotes

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Acknowledgments

This case study, "Creating and Leading Washington State's First Public-Private Partnership to Reduce Family Homelessness: The Washington Families Fund (2004–2009)," was developed by Building Changes, Seattle, WA. Building Changes is a nonprofit organization that works with government entities, private philanthropy, and community-based service providers to ensure that housing and vital public services are available to people experiencing homelessness in Washington State. Building Changes fosters collaborative partnerships and harnesses innovative, evidence-based strategies to collectively address barriers to housing stability and reduce homelessness.

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